



Building Back Better: Reimagining the Care Economy

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Child care is an essential need for parents in the workforce: People can't work if they don't have the security that their families are being cared for. Due to generations of underinvestment in the care economy, many families faced difficulties accessing and affording child care even prior to the pandemic. Then, the COVID-19 crisis underscored just how threadbare our care infrastructure is.

The U.S. economy has relied on women, particularly women of color, to care for our children to keep our economy going. But despite how essential they are, childcare workers earn some of the lowest wages, leaving these women struggling to make ends meet, reliant on public benefits to feed themselves and their families, and extremely vulnerable to economic shocks.

We need a care economy that works for both families and child-care workers. To that end, the Women's Bureau and The Worker Institute at Cornell ILR School recently held the second webinar in our Equity in Focus series, "Equity in Focus: Investing in Childcare Careers." To begin reimagining a child-care system that meets the needs of families while treating child-care workers with dignity, the webinar explored the challenges of the child-care industry and highlighted local examples that are improving access to child care while also increasing wages and compensation for child-care workers.

Promising Programs

Care That Works, a coalition of grassroots community groups and labor unions in Massachusetts, launched a nonstandard-hour childcare pilot program in Boston that matches working parents pursuing careers in construction and hospitality with child-care providers who open as early as 5 a.m. Care That Works Senior Strategist Lindsay McCluskey noted the pilot program is centered around economic, racial and gender equity

principles and has been developed and led by those most impacted by the current child-care crisis. While one of the main goals of the program is to support low-income single mothers who are pursuing or employed in good-paying union jobs, the pilot also provides child caregivers with a monthly stipend. The funding for this vital support service comes from project labor agreements for major construction projects in the Boston area.

Meanwhile, in the District of Columbia, the city council recently voted to use the proceeds from a tax increase on D.C.'s wealthiest residents to raise wages for child-care workers. Executive director of DC Action for Children Kimberly Perry spoke about the years of work to bring this policy to fruition, performed initially by the Birth-to-Three Policy Alliance and now by Under 3 DC, a coalition of nearly 50 member organizations. Kim attributes their success to:

- Building strong authentic partnerships and coalitions.
- Actively ensuring those who are most impacted have central voices in the campaign.
- Acknowledging that doing this work takes money and time, and that centering equity means paying people for their effort. This means leveraging funds from philanthropy to pay for every aspect of the campaign, from organizations doing the work to providing stipends to individuals for their time and energy.

In Ohio, Franklin County Commissioner Erica C. Crawley spoke about the RISE childcare initiative, which builds on the county's commitment to racial equity, recognition of racism as a public health crisis, and development of the Rise Together Poverty Blueprint. The child-care initiative uses American Rescue Plan funds to invest \$23 million over two years to support families struggling to pay for child care, as well as day-care providers. RISE will provide:

- Early learning scholarships for families with incomes between 142-300% of the federal poverty level.
- Incentives to licensed child-care centers and family child-care providers.
- Funds to help support early childhood educators struggling with housing costs.

Now is the time to build a care economy that is affordable for working families and ensures that child-care workers are valued and compensated for the essential work they do caring for and teaching our nation's children. This will take large-scale national investment and a reimagining of a caregiving system to one that centers equity for all. These local initiatives can serve as models as we expand and restructure the care economy.

Elyse Shaw is a policy analyst for the Women's Bureau. Follow the bureau on Twitter: @WB_DOL.

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